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City Life

Sleepless in the City

STROLLS IN THE NUDE? PSYCHOTIC RAMBLINGS? JUST A FEW OF THE SIDE EFFECTS WHEN NEW YORKERS DON'T GET THEIR RECOMMENDED EIGHT HOURS OF SNOOZE TIME. BY ERIN FLAHERTY

Laura Baran couldn't remember the last time she slept. Her pupils were so dilated she had to remove her contacts and wear dark sunglasses. It got to the point that, one morning, she fled her apartment to relieve the stir-crazy anxiety caused by her insomnia. She met a friend at a café in the Village, but found herself unable to eat. "I hadn't slept for three, maybe five days," the usually easy-going 30-year-old musician says. "I felt like I was on coke—totally wired."

As her inability to fall asleep continued, Laura's behavior grew increasingly bizarre. "I called my mom and had this really long, crying, elated, giddy talk with her, telling her that I'd had an abortion a few years back." She also called a friend in L.A. and begged him to sing her the Beatles song "Help," convinced it might soothe her racing brain.

Eventually, Laura just crawled into her bed...and waited. "I started to quietly freak out. I thought I was going to die from being awake." She finally collapsed into sleep, and woke seven hours later in a considerably saner state.

There's a reason that they call New York the city that never sleeps: Between the shriek of car alarms (and ancient radiators), the collective roar of smokers gathered outside bars all night and the rumbling, 4 a.m. arrival of monster garbage trucks, it's virtually impossible to

create an environment that's conducive to getting those coveted eight hours. Add in long workdays, and city dwellers are feeling downright crazy from a lack of brain-boosting REM rest. A recent study from Harvard Medical School and UC Berkeley posits that sleep deprivation can lead to emotionally irrational behavior. Another from the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research links slumberless nights to a decline in the ability to make sound moral judgments.

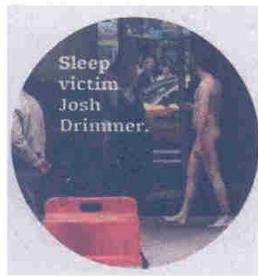
Take Josh Drimmer. Even in Times Square, where you can run across anything from a singing guy in cowboy boots and briefs to the cast of *Sex and the City* filming a movie scene, he created quite a spectacle last month: a bed-headed guy traipsing naked down Seventh Avenue, seemingly without a care in the world.

So was the 26-year-old Yale grad and playwright practicing some audacious exercise in self-expression? Performance art? A prank? Nah. According to a statement he later gave to the *New York Post*, you can simply chalk his actions up to "an extreme panic attack brought on by days of not sleeping. I had a bad day." (The police agreed, hauling Josh to Bellevue for examination. After some much needed rest, he was released.)

Dr. Jeffrey Ditzell, a psychiatrist at Bellevue, confirms that there's a connection between a patient's lack of zzz's and psychological disorders. "Basically, you switch over to brain pathways that don't have as much filtering. Emotionally

you're out of control, and you react in a different way than you might normally," he explains. "You're in a more fragile emotional state. People who are suffering from sleep deprivation may even

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seem psychotic."

In fact, so many of the patients admitted into the psych ward may be suffering from lack of sleep that "we try to make sure they rest before we can make an accurate diagnosis," he says.

Kevin, a 27-year-old film editor, has never experienced psychosis, but he has felt like a different person due to exhaustion. Seventeen-to-nineteen-hour workdays, not to mention occasional all-nighters, are a given in the New York movie production industry. "At some point you just start behaving like you're drunk," he says. "I start gagging a little because my mouth is dry and stomach feels awful. I can't have a normal conversation because I seem to lose some of my vision. I'm chugging Gatorade because I feel hangover-dehydrated. I get very annoyed and short with anyone who tries to ask me questions or needs me to do something. Thinking is out of the question."

Joni Dennis, 32, a Brooklynite who

works in TV production, recently had her whole work schedule change from a noon-to-9 p.m. shift to an 8 a.m.-to-5 p.m. one—but when it came to actually going to bed four hours earlier, she simply couldn't fall asleep. "I've been squeaking by on two or three hours of sleep at night, and I don't just feel tired, I feel crazy," she says. "I keep thinking I've lost my phone, then I'll find it the next day in the vegetable crisper of my fridge. Or I'll leave the milk from my breakfast out on the counter all day. Or I'll go out in the middle of the night to have a cigarette, then forget to lock the door when I come back in."

When the effects of sleeplessness can be so frustrating (and potentially dangerous), it's no wonder that, insured or not, New Yorkers love their sleeping pills. According to managed-care company Medco Health Solutions, the number of adults age 20 to 44 who use such medications doubled from 2000 to 2004. (Not coincidentally, aggressive marketing campaigns advertising these drugs proliferated during that time.) Today Americans spend \$4.5 billion a year on sleep aids. But after receiving numerous reports of somnambulism caused by prescription sleeping medications, the FDA forced drugmakers earlier this year to add warning labels cautioning side effects like sleep-driving and other "complex sleep-related behaviors" (translation: making phone calls, eating or having sex while still asleep).

So how can you prevent "drowsy dialing"—or worse, traipsing around town in your birthday suit? Experts claim the secret is as simple as practicing good sleep hygiene: No caffeine in the afternoon, a regular waking schedule, a comfortable sleeping environment with few distractions (move that TV out of your bedroom ASAP!), and so on.

You could also spend a night at the **Benjamin Hotel** in Midtown Manhattan. The Benjamin was ahead of the curve when they installed a sleep concierge almost seven years ago. Since then, the program has expanded to four specialists who ensure you'll get a good night's sleep—or your money back. According to head sleep concierge Anya Orlanska, guests may customize their pillows, mattresses, sheets and even bedtime snacks. Anya has also honored sleepers' demands for pre-bed massages and lavender spray (requests for Ambien are politely declined).

Or, if you can't afford to stay there for \$200 a night, you can always do what Joni did: "I got heavier curtains to block out the streetlights. And, yes, a bottle of Tylenol PM."